

Who meets the EU's Chief Negotiator?

In this blog, [David Coen \(UCL\)](#) and [Alexander Katsaitis \(LSE\)](#) shed light on the interest groups meeting with the EU's Chief Negotiator, Michel Barnier, and discusses what this means for Brexit and future negotiations on the UK's relationship with the EU.

Organized interests are a key component of policy discussions. Researchers and public affairs' strategists assessing negotiations' progress and trajectory, place a lot of energy analysing which groups interact with policymakers. A fundamental principle underlies this work and can be summed up in three words: information, access, influence. Nevertheless, tracking the specific groups that meet with policymakers can be difficult, even more so in the case of international negotiations like the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal agreement with the European Union (EU).

Policymakers are permanently engaged by numerous interest groups that want to meet with them. However, policymakers have finite resources (e.g. time, staff) they can grant access only to a select few organizations that will meet them. These organizations have built a relationship of trust with policymakers' through multiple interactions over time providing reliable and trustworthy expertise, sometimes to their own cost. In exchange, these groups receive valuable information before any other interest group while best positioned to influence policymakers. Therefore, by assessing the groups meeting with policymakers we can extrapolate the negotiating team's agenda, its strategic focus, and which interest groups are influencing the overall debate.



EU Chief Brexit Negotiator Michel Barnier. Image by GUE/NGL
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The EU's Chief Negotiation (CN) and his team represent a very diverse set of constituencies, while involved in a complex negotiation. This includes private (e.g. business) and public (e.g. civil society, citizens) interests, which reflect organizations across a plethora of policy fields and multiple levels of government (EU, national, regional). To unpick this thread, we examine the entire interest group population that met with Mr Barnier and his team between 2016 and May 2020, focusing on the type of group and level of interest they primarily represent.

To begin with, the 113 groups granted consultations with Mr Barnier and Task Force 50 participate in some of the most exclusive consultations in the EU. Reflecting the complexity of informational demands and the constituencies represented, the groups participating in consultations are diverse. Beyond business groups, civil society, trade unions, and think tanks prominently feature at the top of the list. Moreover, while the majority of the organizations (approximately 45 per cent) represent primarily EU interests however, they also represent national interests and multinational.

Nevertheless, when we start assessing how often specific organizations met with the CN two dimensions become crystalized. The population remains pluralist but revolves around a tightly knit elite circle. From the EU level, we observe established associations representing for example fisheries (EUFA), agriculture (COGECA), industry (ERT), and large companies (Airbus) to name a few. Think tanks, trade unions, and civil society organizations from the EU and national level are present. Most notably, UK interest groups are also part of the few groups that met with Mr Barnier and his team relatively often however, they represent primarily public interests; business groups are largely absent from the top insiders' list.

On a side note, the somewhat surprising story that comes out of this analysis is the distinct rise of think tanks. Considering their overall population size in Brussels and national capitals, they have a disproportionate amount of access. This reflects the negotiations of highly technical aspects, as well as the demand for specialized expertise from groups that have network-capacity.

Lesson #1

The CN has taken a nuanced approach to Brexit. This negotiation resembles a difficult divorce, which comes with complex informational demands. Representing the EU, 27 member states, and all their organized interests is not an easy task. Nevertheless, the CN seems to have avoided the seductive trap of treating the withdrawal agreement as an exclusively economic matter. Respecting its multi-dimensional and multi-level characteristics along with its political, social, and technical variables (to name but a few); the CN has met with a diverse crowd of groups.

Simultaneously, the CN recognizes that good results run not only through Brussels but also through member states. Following the conclusion of the Withdrawal Agreement talks in 2020 and the shift to a discussion about the future relationship, it is possible that the CN will meet with fewer national interests and focus more on EU interests.

Dispelling the myth that only big business has access to Michel Barnier, the pluralist approach offers a good lesson on the value of inclusive consultations and what they mean for international negotiations.

Lesson #2

UK business absence from the insider crowd is in sharp contrast to UK public interests. Nevertheless, after Brexit UK business will have to balance mobilizing both vis-à-vis the UK government the EU. To achieve this, it is likelier to access Brussels through third parties such as trade and professional associations, consultancies, and think tanks.

The voice of UK business will become diluted in Brussels. However, we are quick to underscore that we should not exaggerate this. At least not yet. UK business interests that are linked to multinationals will maintain at least some direct access to the EU policymaking. Conversely, the voice of business from other member states is likely to become more noticeable.

Lesson #3

The Brexit agreement is more of a starting point to a long period of specialized negotiations between the UK and the EU as they attempt to iron out their future relationship. In this process, interest groups have and will continue to mobilize. How this is going to play out is too early to tell. As the EU and the UK are likely to move into more detailed talks over specific policy areas, some industries are likely to see greater mobilization at specific moments in time.

Brexit is a fast-moving research target that requires continuous updates. Work examining lobbying in national capitals and Brussels vis-à-vis Brexit is still at its early stages. In this work, information, access, and influence will remain central concepts.

*This post represents the views of the author(s) and not those of the Brexit blog, nor of the LSE. [Lobbying Brexit Negotiations: Who Lobbies Michel Barnier?](#) is available open access in *Politics & Governance*. '[Business Lobbying in the EU](#)' is available now via Oxford University Press.*